

Reading 303: 300 Years, A Couple Acres, and a Volvo  
*A Classroom's African American Museum of Narrative, 1600-1900*  
Written by Myself

Course  
Language/Arts, Grades 7-9

Institute Participant  
Abigail A. Lindesmith  
Interdistrict Downtown School, WMEP  
Minneapolis, Minnesota

Time Frame  
Five Days  
55-minute class periods

NEH Summer Institute:  
Slavery, Literary and Freedom  
George Mason University, July 2005

#### Goals

- Through reading, listening, and reflecting through the spoken or written word, students will become exposed to oral and written literacies of African American authors prior to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, especially as they signify the importance of literacy.
- By exercises that incorporate technology, close readings, and contemporary music or poetry, students will understand codeswitching and coded language with Black vernacular of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century as well as within today's youth culture.
- Through introduction to prolific Black American writers of the pre-20<sup>th</sup> Century, and by examining the divergence of characters and topics, students will create a working definition of what it means to be Black, or what it means to claim one's culture, in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, looking at and challenging the stereotypes that already exist in students' daily lives.

#### Notes for Teachers

- Page numbers, unless otherwise indicated, are from the Norton Anthology of African American Literature, 1<sup>st</sup> Edition.
- Prior to these lessons, there needs to be education regarding the history and cultures of especially West Africa and the Middle Passage.
- Materials needed: Computer lab, cd player, texts for students
- I give very specific instructions for days 1 and 2. Days 3-5 I give suggested reading materials, but without the detailed start-up activities, discussion questions, and homework assignments. I encourage teachers to use the consistent format that I drew out in lessons 1 and 2, and adapt lessons 3-5 (or beyond) to your own specific needs.
- The lessons here lead up to individual research projects which will culminate into the classroom creation of an African American Museum of Narrative, 1600-1900. An overhead worksheet for kicking off the project and website links to African American museums wrap up this syllabus.

## Rationale for Instruction

The National Urban Alliance, along with many other teacher educators of today, recognize and teach the importance of integrating the culture of a student body into the curriculum. 20<sup>th</sup> Century African American references and literature are accessible to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century teacher if she/he chooses to utilize Black culture, literature, and history in curriculum and classroom. However, this integrated curriculum is still up to an individual teacher, as very few districts in the nation have implemented multicultural standards for our multicultural nation and world (though districts may have approved texts written by authors of color, those lists do not mandate the curriculum).

Most students, especially those in a school whose culture is at least partially African American, are familiar with Dr. King, Malcolm X, and Rosa Parks. Some classrooms have read the fabulous young adult novels by Sharon Draper and Walter Dean Myers. 20<sup>th</sup> Century contributions of African Americans are essential to 21<sup>st</sup> Century learning. This cultural glaze is not enough to feed students' intellect or their history. In the classroom, with Black students or without, in a nation that has been built with the sweat and blood of African peoples, there needs to be far more implicit teaching of African and African American history, culture, and literature engrained in daily and interdisciplinary instruction, at all ages (not just reserved for an 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> grade multicultural literature course).

These brief lessons provide a small grounding for a deeper contextualization of African American curriculum in the classroom. We are well beyond the days of 40 acres and a mule. Like in 1865, no amount of gold can compensate our youth, but education can. Stories of literacy will. Recognition of African American contributions prior to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century is crucial to the development and ownership of American society and culture, for all our students. Whatever we give our students in the classroom is what they will use as they challenge and change their world. We need to give students a greater acreage of the mind, of the oral and written literacies of the past, but what would they possibly do with a mule? It is the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, and teaching African American literature during February is not enough. The African American experience and literacies that reflect it are interdisciplinary and are able to connect richly to any standard a state or district can create. Integrate curriculum and take no excuses. Kick it up a notch and give the kids a couple of acres of literature and a Volvo.

Reading 303: 300 Years, A Couple Acres, and a Volvo  
*A Classroom's African American Museum of Narrative, 1600-1900*

Day 1

Task 1: Sorrow Songs

Play audio songs: Steal Away (13), Soon I Will Be Done (11), and Take My Hand, Precious Lord (20)

Start it Up: Listen and Write Mini-Worksheet (see page 4 for photocopying)  
Hand in worksheet and go to computer lab.

Task 2: Codeswitching in the Computer Lab

Assignment: Email two friends as you normally would. CC the email to your teacher. Then, as a class, use the LCD Projector to codeswitch from the e-mails into Standard English. Recognize that most people use vernacular language when writing informal e-mails. Sometimes it is Black Vernacular Language. Sometimes it is a borrowing and adapting from that language.

Discussion Questions to follow the Sorrow Songs and Codeswitching Exercise

Coded Language and Code Switching
-----------------------------------

Discussion Questions:
-----------------------

- |   |
|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Did you use coded language for anything you didn't want the teacher to know about?</li><li>2. List five places you would use Standard speaking or written English.</li><li>3. Where else, besides an email to a friend, do you use the Vernacular?</li></ol> |
|---|

Hand out lyrics for Sorrow Songs (Spirituals)
---

Discussion Questions:
-----------------------

- |  |
|--|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Did singers code anything in these songs? What would they not have wanted people outside their culture to know or recognize?</li><li>2. Would an enslaved person use Standard English if he/she knew it?</li><li>3. Where would an enslaved person use written English?</li><li>4. What is the connection between these songs and your emails today?</li><li>5. Do musical artists today use codeswitching? Coded language? Why?</li><li>6. What does codeswitching or coded language <i>signify</i>? (leads to homework question for tomorrow)</li></ol> |
|--|

Homework: Ticket 4 2Moro on Signifying (see page 4 for photocopying)

Extra Credit: Have students bring in songs tomorrow, or give you suggestions now, that demonstrated codeswitching or coded language. Aim for songs that have allusions to history, especially allusions to anything before 1900.

**Start it Up: Listen and Write** (Use complete sentences please.)

When have you heard these songs? Who sang them?

Pick one of the songs. What is it about?

When were these songs written (approximately what year)?

**Start it Up: Listen and Write** (Use complete sentences please.)

When have you heard these songs? Who sang them?

Pick one of the songs. What is it about?

When were these songs written (approximately what year)?

**Ticket 4 2Moro** (Get into class free):

What does "Signifying" mean? \_\_\_\_\_

From where, or from whom, did you get the definition?

**Ticket 4 2Moro** (Get into class free):

What does "Signifying" mean? \_\_\_\_\_

From where, or from whom, did you get the definition?

**Ticket 4 2Moro** (Get into class free):

What does "Signifying" mean? \_\_\_\_\_

From where, or from whom, did you get the definition?

## Day 2

Task 1: Play audio songs, 1-3 songs, from student suggestions

Start it Up: Listen and Write Mini-Worksheet (see page 6 for photocopying)  
Hand in worksheet.

Task 2: Lecture, Close Reading, Discussion, and Reflection (Listen, Talk, Read, Write)

- Lecture and Discussion on *Signifying* (homework from last night)
- Read excerpt from Thomas Jefferson's "Notes to the State of Virginia" (1787), especially the section about people of African descent not being able to be as educated and elevated in thought and in the arts, especially compared to white people. (Warning: It will anger up the blood.)

### Discussion Questions:

What was Thomas Jefferson signifying?

Why doesn't he just say it outright?

If Black Americans at the time, including enslaved people, wanted to disagree with him, what were their options?

What are different ways that did Black Americans contributed to the abolishment of slavery?

Why is the art of signifying so specific and necessary to African Americans prior to the Civil War?

Did the people who were enslaved just sit and take it? Did anyone fight back, or write responses to the government? (Transition into homework assignment for tomorrow on David Walker.)

- 10 Minute Quick-Write: Write your feelings about the President of the United States of America saying this about the people who were working, for free, without any rights as citizens. Do you think he was the only one who felt so bias against African Americans? Are Jefferson's stereotypes still alive today? If so, why? Give an example.
- Read some of the responses aloud. Discuss.

Homework: Read a section from David Walker's *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*, Article IV, especially page 54. Ticket 4 2Moro on Apathy (see page 6 for photocopying)

**Start it Up: Listen and Write** (Use complete sentences please.)

Write a lyric from the song:

Codeswitch into Standard English:

What do you think this song, or that phrase, signifies?

**Start it Up: Listen and Write** (Use complete sentences please.)

Write a lyric from the song:

Codeswitch into Standard English:

What do you think this song, or that phrase, signifies?

**Ticket 4 2More** (Get into class free...Be sure to cite your source):

What does "apathy" mean? \_\_\_\_\_

What is an example of apathy? \_\_\_\_\_

If David Walker were alive today, what might he say to you about apathy? \_\_\_\_\_

**Ticket 4 2More** (Get into class free...Be sure to cite your source):

What does "apathy" mean? \_\_\_\_\_

What is an example of apathy? \_\_\_\_\_

If David Walker were alive today, what might he say to you about apathy? \_\_\_\_\_

## Suggested Reading for In-Class or Homework on Days 3-5

### General Suggestions

- Focus on writings that explicitly mention education or literacy.
- Create a template that helps students keep track of the following: Author name, year of birth, year of publication, favorite quote, free or enslaved (or both, as true in many cases), places lived.

### Day 3

- Sojourner Truth "Ar'n't I a Woman" p 198, Norton
- Poetry by Phyllis Wheatley, Jupiter Hammon, and George Moses Horton

### Day 4

- Fredrick Douglass Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, as written by Himself, p 50 on reading, from the © 2000 The Modern Library version, as introduced by Kwame Anthony Appiah.
- Harriet Jacobs, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, p 139 about the scathing words of her master, and p 230, the reward posted for her by Dr. Flint, talking of her ability to read and write. Same book as the Douglass.

### Day 5

- William Wells Brown Clotel, p 120-121 on the Bible and reading, from *Three Classic African-American Novels*, © 1990 Vintage Classics, Ed. By Henry Louis Gates, Jr.
- Frances E.W. Harper Iola Leroy, p 242 on what happened to Aunt Linda when she tried to read. Same book as the Brown.

## Unit Project: African American Museum in Narrative, 1600-1900

Name the Museum (Class brainstorm and democratic vote...can everyone vote?):

*Naming Suggestions prior to unit:*

*Renaming Suggestions after unit:*

**Start it Up** (Use complete sentences please.)

Within African American history and culture, what is the significance of Renaming?

*Museum/Xzibit Name:*

---

Museum Roles:

- Director
- Curator
- Researchers
- Docents
- Planted spectators ("whoa, did you see this?")
- Interior Designers
- Historians (Fact checkers)
- Editors
- Ticket Personnel
- Grant writer
- Reception Catering Team
- Set-up/Take-down Crew
- Guest book creation
- Donation jar

### **African American Museums (General and Online)**

Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York, NY

<http://www.nypl.org/research/sc/sc.html>

The Freedom Center, Cincinnati, Ohio

<http://www.freedomcenter.org/>

The African American Fire Fighter Museum, Los Angeles, CA

<http://www.aaffmuseum.org/>

Tubman African American Museum, Macon, Georgia

[www.tubmanmuseum.com](http://www.tubmanmuseum.com)

Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History

<http://www.maah-detroit.org/>

Anacostia Museum and Center for African American History and Culture

<http://anacostia.si.edu/>

Reginald F. Lewis Museum of Maryland African American History and Culture

<http://www.africanamericanculture.org/>

### **Specifically On-Line Resources, Museum or Archive-Based**

The African American Registry, Minneapolis, MN

<http://www.aaregistry.com/>

The Givens Collection of African American Literature, Minneapolis, MN

<http://special.lib.umn.edu/rare/givens/>

African-American Women, On-line Archival Collections, Special Collections  
Library, Duke University

<http://scriptorium.lib.duke.edu/collections/african-american-women.html>

American Slave Narratives: An Online Anthology

<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/wpa/wpahome.html>

The Black Inventor Online Museum

[www.blackinventor.com](http://www.blackinventor.com)

Smithsonian: African American History and Culture

[http://www.si.edu/history\\_and\\_culture/african\\_american/](http://www.si.edu/history_and_culture/african_american/)

African American Civil War Memorial

<http://www.afroamcivilwar.org/>

AFRO-America's Black History Museum

<http://www.afro.com/history/history.html>

African Culture Online: A Virtual Online Community

<http://www.africancultureonline.com/>

Fathom, The Source for Online Learning

African American Studies Learning Center (and especially links at bottom)

<http://www.fathom.com/special/bhm/>

[Back](#)